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Care for the Caregiver: His Mother Had Never Backpacked; He Took Her to the Presidentials for Her 60th Birthday

Stephen Kurczy

Care for the Caregiver

His mother had never backpacked; he took her to the Presidentials for her 60th birthday

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She hoisted herself up and over another rain-soaked boulder along the Gulfside Trail between Mount Washington and Mount Adams. Each step required concerted effort, as if her mind had to constantly overrule her body's growing yearning to stop. Thick rain clouds rolled along both sides of the 5,000-foot-high ridge. Distant lightning, followed by a low rumble of thunder, threatened to engulf New Hampshire's high peaks, and along with them my 60-year-old mother, Linda Kurczy.

Mom reminds me of a pit bull: short in stature, with cropped black hair and, depending on your perspective, either strong-willed or stubborn. She had been awake since sunrise, grinding forward even as the windchill dropped to 30 degrees. It was August. Her nerves were frayed from a day that had begun in a shelter below Tuckerman Ravine and turned monstrous, with rain turning to hail and wind ramping up to 71 mph (the highest wind speed all month, according to weather data). Such conditions wouldn't surprise those familiar with the area, but this was Mom's first time in the White Mountains.

As darkness settled, she became unsteady on her feet. I feared she might fall and break a tooth or sprain an ankle. We each put on headlamps, and I clenched a flashlight in my teeth. It had been more than four hours since we had hiked away from the Mount Washington Observatory, which had closed its doors early at 4 p.m. because the near-hurricane-force winds had compromised the safety of the Auto Road and spurred most people to evacuate the summit—with the exception of my mother and me, it seemed.

I gripped a hiking pole with one hand while helping Mom over the rock-strewn trail with my other. I took her day pack and wore it along with my 50-liter backpack. I rechecked the map. We didn't say it, but we each wondered if we were lost. An image flashed through my mind of my grief-stricken sisters looking at me and saying, "We can't believe you killed our mother for her 60th birthday."

Mom fell. Then I fell. Then she fell again.

"I don't know if I can keep going," she said, tears coming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," I said, hugging her. "I'm sorry that I got you into this."

"How much farther?" she asked.

Linda Kurczy pushes across the ridge below Mount Washington as a storm lifts.
STEPHEN KURCZY

Despite what the internet says, 60 did not feel like the new 40 for my mother. Born in 1955, the same year that Disneyland opened and Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat, Mom greeted her 60th year with more anxiety and existential self-doubt than a Camus-reading teenager. She questioned what her final years of professional life as a public school teacher would be; she didn't want to be seen as *that teacher*, the one hanging on until retirement. Would society continue to value her? She also seemed haunted by the death of her parents from cancer when they were in their early 60s. Studies have shown that the longer your parents live, the longer you're likely to live, which is comforting unless both your parents died young.

I thought a good hike in the White Mountains might help Mom feel younger, or at least excited about new adventures. She had lived in New England most of her life, yet she'd only seen the White Mountains from a car. In recent years I had started trekking through the range regularly. I would share photos and stories, and Mom would say that she'd love to experience the mountains one day. She was probably just hinting that she'd love to spend more time with *me*, but I took her literally.

So in 2015, during the second week of August, just after Mom's birthday on July 30, I told her to get ready for a weeklong mystery trip. It would be our longest uninterrupted mother–son bonding time since—well, since I was in the womb.

It's strange to think that I once happily lived inside Mom's belly, physically tethered to her through an umbilical cord. Even after that cord was cut, I was still tethered to her emotionally, dependent on her care. This mother–son relationship has been endlessly analyzed, but I think stories about mothers and sons in the wilderness reveal more of the unique dynamic. Of a mother's protectiveness, as with the 2016 story of a Colorado mom who pried open a mountain lion's jaws to rescue her 5-year-old son. Of a mother's encouragement, such as how ultramarathoner Scott Jurek was inspired by his late mother's battle with multiple sclerosis. Or of a grown son's need to take on the role of guide, as I did in this story.

The first stop on our road trip was not Mount Washington but upstate New York, where we spent several carefree days touring wineries. I mention that detail because this story is also about the lengths that a mother will go to spend time with her children. My mother did not drink alcohol for most of her life. In her teens, she joined a conservative Baptist church, where she was inspired to become a missionary. She attended a small evangelical

Stephen and Linda Kurczy in Pinkham Notch, at the start of their two-night backpacking trip. COURTESY OF STEPHEN KURCZY

college in Maine and married an even more conservative man who had attended Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Virginia. Eventually, they returned to Connecticut, where Mom had grown up. My father became the pastor of Mom's childhood church, and she became the director of Christian educational programming. Alcohol didn't mix with that life.

Only after all three of her children had grown up and moved out of the parsonage did Mom try her first glass of wine, one night out with her brothers; she hated it. But she kept trying varieties and quickly developed a taste for dark reds. The drink became a way for her to connect with family and, I think, shrug off some of the pressures of being a pastor's wife. Less than a decade later, as she and I toured the Finger Lakes wine region, I asked her why she had been so opposed to alcohol for most of her life.

"It was called 'the devil's drink,'" she said. For many years, it had been inconceivable to her that a good Christian could have liquor in the cabinet, an assumption that was slowly eroded. She once asked her brother—the same

brother who would later coax her into trying wine for the first time—if he would hide his beer when his church friends came for a house party. He responded, "Why would I do that?" Out to dinner once with church friends, Mom told the waitress that their table would not be drinking alcohol; a friend interjected, saying, "Who are you to speak for me? I'll have a beer."

"It was a jarring reality—that my idea was not the only way," Mom said. That realization was part of a newfound tolerance, not just for alcohol but also for alternative political opinions and religious views. "I'm at a more generous time in my life," she told me. She said she wanted to be more gracious, more compassionate, and slower to judge, and not be seen as a scold or a prude. Then she glanced at me and said, "I've thought so many times, Whatever is Stevie going to say about me at my funeral?" I asked her why she'd wonder such a morbid thing, why she was so emotional about turning 60.

"Because the end is in sight," she said. "I want to stay present, to stay alive in my classroom—not just alive, but vibrantly alive with my students. I long for us to leave our church in a good place, in a strong place. I want to finish these things well. I'm afraid that I'm going to get tired."

Mom preferred red, so I packed a 1-liter carton of Cabernet Sauvignon for our trek into the White Mountains. On August 10, we awoke at 4 a.m. and left the Finger Lakes, driving eight hours across New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire to the town of North Conway. By then, with Mount Washington looming overhead, Mom knew where our mystery ride was headed. When I said we'd pack food for three days, the scale of our hike more fully dawned on her. It's one thing to go up and down Mount Washington in a day, an 8-mile hike with the assurance of a hot shower, warm meal, and soft bed at the end. It's another to spend three days in the wilderness, carrying all food and camping gear, hiking through the elements, sleeping on hard surfaces, and waking to 60-year-old aches and pains. She had never climbed a single 4,000-foot mountain.

We stopped at the gear shop International Mountain Equipment to buy last-minute supplies and check the weather report. Thunderstorms were forecast for the following day, just when we intended to summit Mount Washington and cross the Presidential ridge to Mount Adams. Standing behind the counter, the stern, gray-haired manager Alec Behr warned me, "Tomorrow is not a day when you want to be above treeline." I nodded. Mom, no doubt intimidated by the burly boots for sale all around her, worried that her old hiking boots, which she hadn't worn in a decade, would

not be good enough. She found a secondhand pair of Asolo hiking shoes from IME's basement consignment section.

"Do you think the weather will be a problem?" Mom asked as we got back into our green Subaru. I shrugged. "On Washington, the weather can always be a problem. Locals have the luxury to choose what day they want to hike, but we've come a long way and we're here now. We'll take it as it comes."

We drove to Pinkham Notch Visitor Center and changed into our hiking gear in the basement locker rooms. Upstairs in the lobby, I showed Mom our planned route along the 6-by-8-foot topographical map, beneath which is listed the 150-plus people known to have perished around Mount Washington since the mid-1800s. Her eyes glued to the name of a 63-year-old who had died of a heart attack on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, where we were headed.

Finishing packing, I gently stuffed a full-size bag of Utz potato chips—sour cream and onion, Mom's favorite—into the exterior pocket of my backpack. We each took a trekking pole. Mom was visibly anxious. She later likened the feeling to that moment before you get on a roller coaster: You just want to be strapped in and have the bailout option removed before you psych yourself out.

Starting up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, the dirt path quickly turned into a flow of large rocks. Mom didn't yet realize it, but this would be the terrain for the next three days. Known as "the rock pile," Mount Washington is quite literally a huge pile of mica schist and granite cobbles, which forces the hiker to pay constant attention as she hops from rock to rock.

We gained 1,800 feet in elevation over the 2.4 miles to the Hermit Lake Shelters. With each step, our potato chips bag became more and more bloated, appearing on the verge of bursting. But Mom felt good. We checked in with the Hermit Lake caretaker and found a wooden shelter with a sliding front door. As we dropped our bags, a bearded man popped out and welcomed us. He said he was staying there alone for a full week, a veritable hermit. Mom gave me a look that said, "We're sharing this shack with somebody else?" She soon learned we were also sharing it with curious squirrels and at least one bold mouse.

After unrolling our sleeping pads and sleeping bags on the rough wood floor, we took a walk around Hermit Lake. Among a group of Canadians camping in another shelter, one man was hunched over his boots, duct-taping the rubber to the leather—that could have been my mother had she not invested in that "new" secondhand pair at IME. Back at our shelter, we

poured two cups of red wine and broke open the Utz chips. We munched on diced avocado, fresh olives, crackers, and Finger Lakes goat cheese. The hermit marveled at our spread.

"This is what I've always said I'd want as my last meal," Mom told him. "Good cheese, olives, wine." She didn't realize how ominous she sounded when she said, "my last meal," as if she were a prisoner walking to the gallows or Jesus breaking bread before the crucifixion.

The day of the storm began with a beautiful sunrise. I slid open the shelter's door, revealing a glow on the horizon that cut orange through the low clouds and cast silver shadows across the forested mountain ridges. We warmed up with instant coffee and oatmeal, then packed and were back on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail by 7 a.m.

As we ascended the steep, treeless path, the predicted storm clouds began swooping into the valley below and tumbling over the ridge above. As we topped out of the ravine, the clouds enveloped us, too. Visibility dropped to 25 feet. I strained to see to the next trail-marking cairn. The mist turned to rain, then hail. The wind picked up to 71 mph. I saw a shadowy movement nearby. Two other hikers lay on the ground. One of them was crying because the wind had knocked her over. We passed in silence. Now a strong gust pushed my mother sideways and to the ground. While intimidating, the wind was still only one-third of its maximum recorded speed atop Washington: 231 mph, in 1934. The only higher wind speed measured on Earth was in 1996, when Tropical Cyclone Olivia sent a 254 mph gust over an Australian island, although that was recorded by an unmanned device and not by two dudes hunkered inside a rattling cabin atop New England's highest peak.

We had no idea what our distance to the summit was until we realized we were standing beneath one of the weather towers. A bit after 9 a.m., we reached the summit post, which noted the elevation at 6,288 feet. Although the peak normally would be overrun with visitors that time of year, we were the only people in sight. Few others had deemed the summit worthwhile in these conditions. Yet we were only a quarter done with our day's journey.

The plan next was to hike across the Gulfside Trail to Mount Jefferson and down to Edmands Col, then turn onto the Randolph Path toward our destination of Crag Camp on the north slope of Mount Adams. For now, however, we were going nowhere. We took shelter inside the visitor center and shed our wet clothes. Weather radar showed a massive storm moving across New England for the next several hours. There was nothing to do but wait.

We played rummy. Mom wrote postcards and mailed them from the summit's post office. We could see nothing but white out the windows, so our focus turned to the stream of waterlogged hikers taking refuge inside. A shivering teenager showed up alone because he'd lost contact with his father somewhere near Mount Madison; the kid waited all afternoon in his sopping wet jeans, only to learn that his dad was waiting for him at the base of the mountain. Another father and son who'd taken the Cog Railway up walked inside soaked and appearing physically rattled from the trip. "It was like riding inside a washing machine," the dad said of the railcar journey. Two brawny Canadian hikers, dressed in serious trekking gear and rain protection, departed the visitor center to hike down to Pinkham Notch only to return drenched a half-hour later. "The weather is brutal," one said. "We're taking the shuttle down." They were joined by a mother–daughter team thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail who had decided, for the first time in their entire Georgia-to-Maine journey, to leave the trail and take shelter overnight from the elements.

A ranger warned that the last shuttle would be leaving early because the high winds and pounding rain had compromised its safety. The visitor center would also close its doors an hour early. At 3:30 P.M., as staff began mopping floors and stacking chairs, I told Mom we had to choose one of several options: (1) Pay $50 apiece to take the shuttle down the Auto Road; (2) hike 1 mile to Lakes of the Clouds Hut and potentially pay $127 apiece to stay there overnight (space permitting); (3) hike 1.6 miles back down Tuckerman Ravine to Hermit Lake Shelters; (4) hike 4 miles back to our car at Pinkham Notch; (5) continue with the original plan of hiking another 4.5 miles above treeline across the high-elevation Presidential ridge, which is covered in challenging boulder-strewn terrain.

"It's too many details," she said. "Just tell me what to do."

I pointed out the window and said we could now see several hundred feet to the parking lot, so it seemed the clouds were dissipating. Mom was skeptical: "Look how the window pane is still shaking in the wind." The clouds were so thick that she hadn't had cell service all afternoon, but now she suddenly got a few bars. On her tenth try calling, she reached my father—the minister—and asked him to pray that their son would make the right decision. She later told me she felt compelled to make the call in case he never heard from her again.

"I think our original plan to hike across the Presidential ridge is still doable," I said. The rain was easing, the wind was dying, the clouds were

lifting, and the weather radar was showing a sustained break in the storm. "We'll be fine. We'll be there before sunset."

"You really think we can do it?" Mom asked.

"Yes," I said.

I believed I was making a calculated decision based on weather reports and my familiarity with the mountain trails, though I also know I was toeing the line for unacceptable risk when hiking with your 60-year-old mom. This readiness to brush aside her concerns reminds me of how an ex-girlfriend once told me, when we were breaking up, that my lack of empathy was borderline sociopathic. I've since been reassured by friends and family (and a new girlfriend) that I am not a sociopath. But I know that I can be slow to sympathize with others' pain and fear, that I don't readily place myself in another's shoes, that I don't quickly see—or simply don't *want* to see—that my abilities and thresholds may fundamentally differ from my partner's. In my mind, if you have a goal, you pursue it, pain and obstacles be damned. And in the circular logic of someone who thinks that way, I sometimes see the person who fails to stay committed as another obstacle to be overcome through coercion, force of will, or by minimizing their concerns. This way of thinking is what led me to downplay the decisions of other hikers and the advice from the manager back at IME.

The irony is that I got this trait from my mother. Like her, I can be described as either intensely driven and strong-willed or myopically stubborn and bullheaded. The same sense of conviction that made Mom a teetotaler for her first 50 years—as well as sustained her marriage, her faith, and her belief that her three children were the most incredible beings on the planet—had also nurtured my personality over the years. If I have a goal and am convinced of its worthiness, it can be near impossible to change my mind. In the White Mountains, this shared sense of conviction was coming full circle. The character trait that my mother had instilled in me was leading us into the storm together. She was so eager to please me and so hungry to spend time with me that she could not consider quitting on me.

Shortly after 4 p.m., we left the summit visitor center and marched into the rain wearing hats, gloves, jackets, and ponchos. Minutes later, Mom broke down crying. Hours of anxiously waiting had frayed her nerves and drained her emotionally. She seemed frightened by how the rain had turned the trail into a field of slippery boulders.

"I don't know if I can do this," she said.

"We can still turn back and take a shorter way down," I said. "There's nothing wrong with that." Yet even as I said that, I knew that we had already given up both the shuttle and the Cog Railway, whose rattling engine we could now hear fading away in the fog. Finally, for the first time, I wondered, What kind of birthday gift am I giving my mother?

"Just let me cry," she said. "I need to let out some stress."

I expected the traverse from Mount Washington to Mount Jefferson and then down to Crag Camp to take three hours, tops. I had not factored in the slipperiness, my mother's physical exhaustion, or her mental fatigue. We moved slower than 1 mile per hour during the five-hour journey.

There were moments of stunning beauty. Rounding Mount Clay, the clouds parted, and we could see a small blue pocket for the first time all afternoon. As the barometric pressure rose, the clouds dropped into the valley, leaving us with a spectacular view of a series of mountain ridges with clouds spilling down between them like rivers. For me, detached from the growing pain my mother was feeling, the experience felt worth the risk of getting caught in a thunderstorm. But as the hours wore on, Mom became increasingly sluggish. She scrambled over boulder after boulder only to encounter yet another boulder, at which point she hung her head and muttered, "Oh, c'mon." "Stevie, she said, "this is not what I had in mind for my birthday." Then she stopped speaking altogether—it required too much energy—leaving her mind to turn over the worst scenarios. Soon one started to unfold: hiking in the dark. She later said she'd been convinced we were lost and would be sleeping in the rain.

Dropping below treeline, we both put on headlamps. I tried to reassure her that we were going in the right direction, that our destination was near, that she was doing fine. I was becoming her cheerleader and leading her as she had led me for the previous 32 years of my life.

"How much farther?" she asked.

"It shouldn't be far," I said. The actual distance was still another hour; I also didn't reveal that we'd taken a wrong turn that would add a strenuous final uphill to the journey. "We'll stop at Gray Knob cabin. We don't need to keep hiking the extra half-mile to Crag Camp."

"But you wanted to camp there tonight. We can still go," Mom said meekly, trying to be a good sport.

"I've already put you through enough misery," I said.

Slippery boulders slowed the pace as the afternoon wore on. STEPHEN KURCZY

I'd never seen my mother so vulnerable or so willing to accept help. And in that moment of extremity, with Mom stumbling on nearly every step and me slowly guiding her forward, I felt that we had reversed roles, even though this came about through my willingness to take risks. Yet here we were: She had once carried me. Now, I was carrying her, holding her hand as she balanced across the rock-strewn trail in the night.

At 9:17 P.M., a time that my mother later said was seared into her memory, we reached an empty Gray Knob cabin. Mom stepped inside and collapsed on a bench, exhausted and helpless. She closed her eyes and didn't move. I unrolled our sleeping bags in the loft, then returned downstairs to find Mom still splayed on the wooden bench, her waterlogged boots still laced tight. I untied the knots and peeled off her boots and wet socks. I spread out dinner, but she said she felt too exhausted to consume anything but a few sips of wine. She said she needed to pee, so I helped her up and out the back door toward a footpath leading to the drafty outhouse. It was far enough for Mom to groan midway, "I'm about to go right here."

When I read the Accidents section of this journal, I sometimes cringe at the similarities between my adventures in the White Mountains and the misadventures of those who run into real trouble. I feel that I got away with something. I am reminded that my luck will run out if I keep pushing it.

And yet, the very intensity of such trips into the White Mountains can force a deeper awareness of one's abilities and limits, of one's relationship to nature and to other people. Our trek forced my mother and me to experience what the future holds as she ages. I will be asked to think carefully about her well-being, to make decisions for her safety. Increasingly, I will need to be the caretaker off the mountain, and this stubbornly self-sufficient woman will need to relinquish control and accept others' care.

The day after the storm, I awoke at 6 a.m., unzipped from my sleeping bag, slid my feet into my soggy shoes, and went outside to fill two big jugs with water from the spring a quarter-mile away. The clouds were lifting, and sunlight was filtering through the trees. By the time I returned to the hut to boil water for coffee and oatmeal, Mom was awake and moving—slowly, but moving nonetheless.

Mom said her quads were shot, so she used both trekking poles to steady her wobbly legs. We hiked a half-mile to Crag Camp, where the deck offered a clear view to the summit of Mount Madison and down into the valley. Mom leaned against the railing and soaked in the sunlight. A finch flew onto the deck and chirped for food. A hiker's dog jumped in the sun. The setting was almost surreal, like we'd hiked through hell and arrived in a kind of mountaintop Eden.

From Crag Camp, we descended nearly four miles to Route 2. Mom braced herself on the steeper sections but was soon walking easily, as the rocky, evergreen-lined path turned into a rolling dirt trail dotted with mushrooms and surrounded by tall maples. The air warmed, and the humidity increased. It was practically balmy. When we reached the Appalachia trailhead, Mom again started to cry.

"I'm so sad that it's over," she said with teary eyes. She had experienced the extremes of Mount Washington and the White Mountains: the quirky and kind people, the sunshine and hailstones, the stunning vistas and socked-in summits. We had pushed ourselves to the extremes of emotion and physical strength. She had cried several times. At times, we both had been annoyed—she for being pushed to exhaustion, me for being forced to slow down. But we had confronted everything together. And that it was our

Linda Kurczy, near the end of the odyssey, points to the sign warning that only those in "top physical condition" take the trail she had just descended. STEPHEN KURCZY

longest time alone together since she had been pregnant with me underscored its incalculable value.

Something about the mountains—the isolation, the beauty, the challenge—brings parents and children together. The following summer, my mother's brother—the same brother who had introduced her to alcohol a decade earlier—convinced his teenage son to climb all 48 of New Hampshire's 4,000-footers with him. (Fittingly, one night my uncle offered his son his first sip of beer.) People repeatedly told them during the hike, "You're so lucky to have this time together." My uncle later told me, "I really do feel like I was stealing this moment in time." His son had slightly less enthusiasm for three weeks of one-on-one time with his father, but surely all children take their parents' time for granted, as I long have. As my mother came to terms with turning 60 and her time running down, what better gift could I have given than my own time?

Standing on the side of Route 2, we stuck out our thumbs to hitch a ride back to Pinkham Notch. Within minutes, a Subaru stopped and offered us a

lift all the way back to our own Subaru parked 17 miles away. The driver asked what we'd been up to. Mom gushed about how her son had taken her on a mountain trek. The man nodded, then told a story of how he'd taken his own mother on an 80th birthday trip to Washington, D.C. "She was so happy we did it, and so was I because she died two years later."

"Hopefully my mom lasts a few more years," I joked. Mom laughed, too, because what else can you do?

In a sense, it all was a glimpse into the future. Mom would soon be diagnosed with lung cancer. The following March, on the day after Easter, she underwent a lobectomy that cut away nearly one-third of her lung capacity. I had my heart broken when I saw how frail she looked in postoperative care, tubes sticking out of her chest, and once again I was challenged to be her caretaker—a role that I had never easily embraced but that, perhaps in a small way, we started preparing for in the White Mountains.

I spent a month home with Mom during her recovery, prodding her to do regular breathing exercises and, despite the agonizing pain, to walk a bit farther each day.

First she walked just around the house, then up and down the street, and soon around the block, with the goal to complete a loop around a nearby lake by end of the month—a challenge so much smaller and yet so much bigger than our trek across the Presidentials. It was slow going. She constantly sought my affirmation, saying, "I'm doing good, aren't I, Stevie?" At times she felt she'd never fully recover. But she kept pushing, one boulder at a time. She made it around the lake. She went back to teaching. She held a new grandchild.

The bout with cancer would seem to justify her fear of dying young, as her parents had in their 60s. But the battle also helped her get over that fear, similar to how she had hiked through the storms of Mount Washington and emerged stronger for it. Rather than being a cancer-watcher, she became a cancer survivor, telling me how she'd love to experience more mountains with me.

Stephen Kurczy is a Connecticut-based journalist working on a book about the National Radio Quiet Zone. He last wrote for the Winter/Spring 2016 issue of *Appalachia* about climbing Mount Aconcagua.